

I-35 Item From Council  
Version 1  
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**WHEREAS**, the I-35 Capital Express North, I-35 Capital Express Central, and I-35 Capital Express South Projects are a complete rebuild of the United States Interstate Highway 35 throughout all of Austin; and

**WHEREAS**, the rebuild of United States Interstate Highway 35 through all of Austin is a once in a generation opportunity to make transformative changes to United States Interstate Highway 35; and

**WHEREAS**, United States Interstate Highway 35 originally opened in 1962, 60 years ago and whatever is built today is unlikely to be completely rebuilt for at least 50 years, and design choices made today could preclude future connections and improvements to the highway; and

**WHEREAS**, Austin will experience significant growth over the next 50 years, and many neighborhoods outside of downtown next to the highway will become more urban in character and see increased rates of bicycle and pedestrian activity, along with a need for connectivity across the highway; and

**WHEREAS**, the construction of the Interstate Highway System did immeasurable damage to many communities across the United States, especially communities of color, and many cities throughout the United States are now trying to undo that damage; and

**WHEREAS**, the average distance between east-west streets crossing United States Interstate Highway 35 in the Capital Express North Project is 1.16 miles, the average distance between east-west street crossings in the Capital Express South Project is 1.33 miles, the same as they are today, and the average distance between east-west street crossings in the Capital Express Central Project is .36 miles; and

**WHEREAS**, the I-35 Capital Express North and I-35 Capital Express South Projects do not add any new street crossings, and the I-35 Capital Express Central Project will either have the same number of east-west street crossings or reduce the number of east-west street crossings; and

**WHEREAS**, such long distances between east-west street crossings disconnects communities, encourages speeding, increases pollution, and increases congestion at the remaining intersections, pushing more cars into fewer intersections forces drivers to take more turns than they would have taken if they could drive straight through, creating more conflict with pedestrians, bikes, and other vehicles; and

**WHEREAS**, although some new bike and pedestrian bridges and trails are proposed, in most cases the additional bridges and trail crossings will require people to go up long ramps and offer

a much more difficult connection than a normal street crossing; and

**WHEREAS**, the existing distance between east-west crossings is almost two miles in some places, including between William Cannon Drive and Slaughter Lane, forcing many residents living on or near the frontage road to take up to a four mile loop to go to destinations less than half a mile away; and

**WHEREAS**, the removal of Woodland Avenue as a full crossing in the Capital Express Central Project creates a division in the city of more than a mile between the Riverside Drive and Oltorf Street crossings; and

**WHEREAS**, the portions of the I-35 Capital Express Projects that are not being capped do very little to improve connectivity or mitigate the pollution, noise, and other negative impacts of United States Interstate Highway 35 on surrounding neighborhoods, and by adding more lanes, including new elevated lanes in South Austin, the United States Interstate Highway 35 expansion threatens to worsen those impacts; and

**WHEREAS**, lowering and capping highways provides significant environmental benefits, including reduced noise, air pollution, and heat island impact; and

**WHEREAS**, many other Texas and United States cities have chosen to lower and cover their highways; and

**WHEREAS**, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) capped a quarter mile section of the Woodall Rodgers Freeway in downtown Dallas and created a successful urban park that has become an extremely popular destination, and the project was so successful that construction has already started on another cap in Dallas - the Southern Gateway on United States Interstate Highway 35E in the Oak Cliff neighborhood close to the Dallas Zoo; and

**WHEREAS**, the City's Corridor Program Office has been working with TxDOT to identify opportunities to create caps over the United States Interstate Highway 35 as well as widened bridges that accommodate improved safety and multimodal connectivity; and

**WHEREAS**, United States Interstate Highway 35 is an international roadway that carries traffic all the way from Mexico to Canada, including a large volume of 18-wheel trucks, and a single 18-wheel truck produces a much greater amount of pollution, noise, and traffic than a single passenger vehicle, and is considerably more deadly in a crash; and

**WHEREAS**, design choices including speed limits, lane widths, and other factors can have a significant impact on the safety of the United States Interstate Highway 35 frontage road, and the Austin Transportation Department staff have made many useful suggestions and comments on how the I-35 Capital Express Projects can be improved; **NOW, THEREFORE**,

**BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF AUSTIN:**

Austin City Council offers the following comments to be included as official comments from the Council as part of public comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the I-35 Capital Express Central Project:

1. The I-35 Capital Express Central Project should add more full east-west crossings for all users including cars, bikes, and pedestrians. As it is currently 83 proposed, the preferred alternative would have one less full east-west crossing than 84 currently exists. The I-35 Capital Express Project should aim to have a full east-west crossing that works for all users around every 1/4th of a mile, and should not have any span between full east-west crossings greater than 1/2 mile.

**TxDOT Response:**

*The proposed I-35 Capital Express Central project preferred alternative includes one less number of crossings for all users, adds seven proposed bicycle and pedestrian only crossings, and shortens distances between crossings compared to the no-build option as detailed below.*

Crossing Details	Existing	Proposed
All User (cars, bikes, and pedestrians)	25	24
Bicycle, Pedestrian Only	0	7
Crossings < 1/4 mile	15	19
Crossings between 1/4 and 1/2 mile	7	8
Crossings > 1/2 mile	2	1

*One notable all user crossing that is proposed to be replaced with a bicycle/pedestrian crossing is at the Woodland Avenue location. This decision was made several reasons including the close proximity (approximately 1/2 mile) of the adjacent turnaround opportunities at E. Riverside Drive and E. Oltorf Street, elimination of the signals at Woodland will operate efficiently, and an all-user crossing would have required additional property displacements at Woodland, including the newly constructed Aria Grand apartment complex. TxDOT will continue to work with the City of Austin to identify and evaluate potential improvements to crossings throughout the eight-mile project corridor. TxDOT will evaluate the potential of widening the pedestrian bridge at the Capital Plaza crossing north of 51<sup>st</sup> Street to match the 60 ft. width of the proposed Woodland Avenue crossing.*

2. The I-35 Capital Express Central Project should create new opportunities and amenities for residents by lowering and covering as much of United States Interstate Highway 35 as possible. The locations of caps should be prioritized to maximize value to the public, including making new land available for development that could fund caps through Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone, Tax Increment Financing, and similar funding mechanisms.

**TxDOT Response:**

*The preferred alternative design would allow the opportunity to build structural support for deck plazas if funded by others, while still meeting the purpose and need for the proposed project. Approximately 34 acres of deck plazas have been identified as feasible given design limitations due to fire life safety elements required for roadway tunnels. TxDOT will continue to work with the City of Austin to identify and evaluate potential additional locations for deck plazas. [AMC1] In order to include the structural supports for deck plazas, design loadings would need to be provided by spring 2024 and funding identified by fall 2024 to be included in the construction documents. TxDOT is working closely with the City of Austin on Our Future 35, which is leading the conceptual analysis of deck plazas and other local enhancements, as well as with University of Texas (UT) for deck opportunities adjacent to the UT campus.*

3. The I-35 Capital Express Central Project should ensure that I-35 is designed and built in a way that does not preclude adding additional caps and connections in the future. In particular, Council urges TxDOT to evaluate the removal, reconfiguration, or relocation of ramps, including managed lane ramps, to expand the potential for capping and provide additional east-west crossings.

**TxDOT Response:**

*The I-35 Capital Express Central project preferred alternative allows for the opportunity to build structural support for deck plazas. However, the \$4.5 billion of TxDOT allocated construction funding does not include the additional structural support to carry the load for these local enhancements of a deck plaza or the fire life safety requirements for a vehicular tunnel. The cost for City of Austin structural support and fire life safety controls is estimated at \$325M. The source of funding would need to be identified by fall 2024 to be included in TxDOT's construction documents.*

*The current configurations, ramp locations, and deck plaza opportunities are the result of many years of mobility, operational and safety analysis and collaboration between TxDOT, the City of Austin's Transportation Department and Corridor Program staff, critical service providers and stakeholders, and local community groups. TxDOT is committed to continuing this collaboration to deliver a project with the maximum benefits to all users given the constraint challenges of this corridor.*

4. Encourage TxDOT, the Austin Transportation Department, and other City departments to continue to collaborate and prioritize reducing the environmental, traffic, and safety impacts of United States Interstate Highway 35, especially the frontage roads. Frontage roads and east-west crossings should prioritize service to the local street network.

**TxDOT Response:**

*TxDOT will continue to work with Austin Transportation Department to design the project to best integrate with the local street network for all users.*

5. Minimize the number of properties impacted by imminent domain and provide as much mitigation as possible for the impacted businesses and residents.

**TxDOT Response:**

*The I-35 Capital Express Central preferred alternative has been designed to minimize right-of-way needs while still meeting the purpose and need for the proposed project. The preferred alternative (Modified Build-Alternative 3) reduces displacements to residences (26 vs. 145) and businesses (59 vs. 131) compared to Build-Alternative 2 and displaces fewer minority and low-income residential and business properties (90 vs. 172).*

*The Landowner Bill of Rights guides the process for purchase of properties impacted by the project. TxDOT will provide additional mitigation for displacements of community facilities that serve low-income, minority populations, or otherwise underserved communities, including healthcare facilities and other businesses. These additional services include:*

- *Offering opportunities for advance acquisition of property.*
- *Allowing occupants, during the relocation process, to remain in the existing facility for an agreed amount of time negotiated between the property owner and TxDOT to allow for the continuation of healthcare/childcare services to the community.*
- *Offering assistance (shuttle service, CapMetro passes) to commute to medical appointments.*
- *Federal regulations allow rental assistance to be supplemented to residential tenants, but not for business tenants. As mitigation to the eight businesses within environmental justice areas who are tenants, TxDOT is offering rental assistance supplements to these businesses that serve this specific community. Rental assistance supplements include finding a comparable business location and the opportunity for additional rental price differential over what they are currently paying, within limits, for 42 months.*

6. In order to reduce the substantial impact of 18-wheelers on congestion, air quality, and road safety, incentives should be provided to reroute 18-wheeler traffic that is passing through Austin to Texas State Highway 130.

**TxDOT Response:**

***The TxDOT Austin District conducted the Interstate 35 (I-35) Through-Trip Study in 2019 to better understand the movement of passenger vehicles and freight along the I-35 corridor.***

- ***Most of the truck traffic on I-35 has an origin or destination near the corridor, meaning that I-35 is a desirable or necessary route. Freight-related industries along the I-35 corridor constitute one-third of employment and GDP in Travis, Williamson and Hays counties combined, and are likely to attract and generate truck traffic.***
- ***The majority of light duty trucks (<10,000 lbs) are making short-distance local trips along I-35.***

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:**

The Austin City Council expresses its desire to see more improvements to the North Capital Express Central and South Capital Express Projects, specifically:

1. The I-35 Capital Express South and I-35 Capital Express North Projects should add more full east-west crossings for all users including cars, bikes, and pedestrians. As they are currently planned, no new full east-west crossings are added, and the average distance between crossings is more than 1 mile. The Projects should aim to have a full east-west crossing that works for all users around every 1/2 mile, and should not have any span between full east-west crossings greater than 1 mile.

**TxDOT Response:**

***Both projects have been environmentally cleared, and construction contracts awarded. The groundbreaking for the I-35 Capital Express South project was last fall and the I-35 Capital Express North project will break ground by spring. TxDOT could work with the city to identify pedestrian bridges if funding of the construction change order was paid for by the city. Costs would include design, construction, right of way, utilities and environmental clearance. Cost for design and construction of one pedestrian bridge is estimated at \$20M and the other costs would vary by location.***

2. The I-35 Capital Express Central Project should ensure that United States Interstate Highway 35 is designed and built in a way that does not preclude adding additional connections in the future.

**TxDOT Response:**

***This project does not preclude future connections. Those potential projects would proceed through the standard project development process in conjunction with the Capital Metropolitan Planning Organization's Transportation Plan and involve a separate schematic and environmental study.***